

FIVE

Sunday Morning

The next morning Mario came back to the newsstand with his father. Usually he slept late on Sunday, but today he was up before either of his parents and kept urging Papa Bellini to hurry.

They lifted off the cover and Mario dashed inside. He held up the matchbox and looked in. There was Chester, lying on the Kleenex. The cricket wasn't asleep though—he had been waiting for Mario. He chirped once.

Papa smiled when he heard the chirp. "He must like it here," he said. "He didn't run away in the night."

"I knew he wouldn't," said Mario.

For breakfast Mario had brought a crust of bread, a lump of sugar, and a cold Brussels sprout. He wasn't quite sure what crickets liked, so he decided to try him out on everything. Chester jumped over Mario's little finger into the palm of his hand where the food was. Back in the meadow his usual diet was leaves and grass, and every now and then a piece of tender bark, but here in New York he was eating bread and

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candy and liverwurst, and finding them very tasty at that.

When Chester had had as much as he wanted, Mario wrapped what was left in a piece of wax paper and put it inside the cash register. Then he slipped the cricket back inside the matchbox and took him over to one of the lunch counters.

"Look," he said to the counterman. "This is my new pet. He's a cricket."

The counterman's name was Mickey. He had red, curly hair. "That's a fine cricket," he said, peering in at Chester.

"May he have a glass of water, please?" asked Mario.

Mickey said, "Sure," and gave him the glass. Mario held Chester by the hind legs and lowered him carefully until his head was just above the water. Chester dunked his head in and had a big drink. Then he pulled it out, took a breath, and went in for another.

"Why don't you let him stand on the rim?" said Mickey. He was very interested in watching Chester, since he had never seen a cricket drinking from a glass before.

Mario set his pet on the edge of the glass and gently drew his hand away. Chester bent down to try to reach the water. But the glass was too slippery. He toppled in. Mario hauled him out and dried him off with a paper napkin. But Chester didn't mind the dunking. He had fallen in the brook a couple of times back in Connecticut. And he knew it would take him a while to get used to city life—like drinking out of glasses.



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"How would the cricket like a soda?" asked Mickey.

"Very much, I think," said Mario.

"What flavor?" Mickey asked.

Mario thought a minute. "Strawberry, I guess," he answered. That happened to be his own favorite flavor.

Mickey took a tablespoon and put a drop of strawberry syrup into it. Then he added a drop of cream, a squirt of soda water, and a dip of ice cream about as big as your fingernail. That is how you make a cricket's strawberry soda. He also made one for Mario—a little larger than Chester's, but not too big, because it was free.

When the sodas were gone, Mickey took a paper cup and wrote CRICKET on it. "This is his own cup," he said to Mario. "You can come over and get fresh water any time."

"Thanks, Mickey," said Mario. He put Chester back in the matchbox. "I've got to go to get him a house now."

"Bring him back soon," Mickey called after them. "I'll make him a sundae too."

At the newsstand Papa Bellini was talking to Mr. Smedley. Mr. Smedley was the best customer the Bellinis had. He was a music teacher who came to buy *Musical America* at ten-thirty in the morning on the last Sunday of every month, on his way home from church. No matter what the weather was like, he always carried a long, neatly rolled umbrella. As usual, Papa and Mr. Smedley had been talking about opera. More than anything else the Bellini family liked Italian opera.

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Every Saturday during the winter, when the opera was broadcast, they would sit clustered around the radio in the newsstand, straining to hear the music above the din of the subway station.

"Good morning, Mr. Smedley," said Mario. "Guess what I have."

Mr. Smedley couldn't guess.

"A cricket!" said Mario, and held Chester up for the music teacher to see.

"How delightful!" said Mr. Smedley. "What an enchanting little creature."

"Do you want to hold him?" asked Mario.

Mr. Smedley shrank back. "Oh, I don't think so," he said. "I was stung by a bee when I was eight years old, and since then I've been a little timid about insects."

"He won't sting you," said Mario. He tipped the matchbox up and Chester fell out in Mr. Smedley's hand. It made the music teacher shiver to feel him. "I heard him chirping last night," said Mario.

"Do you think he'd chirp for me?" asked Mr. Smedley.

"Maybe," said Mario. He put Chester on the counter and said, "Chirp, please." Then, so Chester couldn't misunderstand, he made a chirping noise himself. It didn't sound much like a cricket, but Chester got the idea. He uncrossed his wings and made a real chirp.

Papa and Mr. Smedley exclaimed with delight. "That was a perfect middle C," said Mr. Smedley. He raised his hand like an orchestra conductor, and when he lowered it, Chester chirped on the downbeat.

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"Do you want to give him music lessons, Mr. Smedley?" asked Mario.

"What could I teach him?" said Mr. Smedley. "He's already been taught by the greatest teacher of all, Mario—Nature herself. She gave him his wings to rub together and the instinct to make such lovely sounds. I could add nothing to the genius of this little black Orpheus."

"Who is Orpheus, Mr. Smedley?" asked Mario.

"Orpheus was the greatest musician who ever lived," said the music teacher. "Long, long ago he played on a harp—and he played it so beautifully that not only human beings but animals and even the rocks and trees and waterfalls stopped their work to listen to him. The lion left off chasing the deer, the rivers paused in their courses, and the wind held its breath. The whole world was silent."

Mario didn't know what to say. He liked that picture of everyone keeping quiet to listen. "That must have been awfully good playing," he said finally.

Mr. Smedley smiled. "It was," he said. "Perhaps someday your cricket will play as well. I prophesy great things for a creature of such ability, Mario."

"You hear?" said Papa Bellini. "He could be famous, maybe."

Mario heard, all right. And he remembered what Mr. Smedley had said later on that summer. But right now he had other things on his mind. "Papa, can I go down to Chinatown and get my cricket a house?" he asked.

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"A house? What kind of a house?" said his father.

"Jimmy Lebovski said that the Chinese like crickets very much, and they build special cages for them," Mario explained.

"It's Sunday," said Papa. "There won't be any stores open."

"Well, there may be one or two open," said Mario. "It's Chinatown—and besides, I could see where to go later on."

"All right, Mario," Papa Bellini began, "but—"

But Mario wasn't waiting for any "buts." He scooped Chester into the matchbox, shouted "Goodbye, Mr. Smedley" over his shoulder, and headed for the stairway leading to the downtown subway trains. Papa and Mr. Smedley watched him go. Then Papa turned to the music teacher with a happy, hopeless expression on his face, shrugged his shoulders, and the two of them began talking about opera again.

Sai Fong

Mario took the IRT local subway downtown. He held the matchbox up at the level of his chest so the cricket could see out. This was the first time Chester had been able to watch where he was going on the subway. The last time he had been buried under roast beef sandwiches. He hung out of the box, gazing up and down the car. Chester was a curious cricket, and as long as he was here in New York, he meant to see as much as he could.

He was staring at an old lady wearing a straw hat, wondering if the flowers on it were real, and if they were what they would taste like, when the train lurched to a halt. Like most people who first ride the subway, Chester wasn't used to the abrupt stops. He toppled out of the matchbox into Mario's lap.

The boy picked him up again. "You've got to be careful," he said, putting his finger over the open end of the box so there was just enough room for Chester to poke his head out.

At the Canal Street stop Mario got off and walked

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over several blocks to Chinatown. Chester craned his head out as far as he could to get his first look at New York by day. The buildings in this part of town weren't nearly as high as they were in Times Square, but they were still high enough to make Chester Cricket feel very small.

In Chinatown, as Papa had said, all the shops were closed. Mario walked up and down the narrow, curving streets, zigzagging across them so he could look in the windows on both sides. In some he saw the cardboard shells that open up into beautiful paper flowers if you put them in a glass of water, and in others the glass wind harps that tinkle when they're hung in the window where the breeze can reach them. But he couldn't find a cricket cage anywhere.

Down at the end of an alley there was an especially old shop. The paint was peeling off the doors and the windows were crammed with years' and years' collection of knickknacks. A sign hanging out in front said, SAI FONG—CHINESE NOVELTIES, and printed underneath, in smaller letters, was "also do hand laundry." Sitting cross-legged on the doorstep was an old Chinese man. He was wearing a silk vest over his shirt with dragons embroidered on it in red thread, and he was smoking a long white clay pipe.

Mario stopped and looked in the shop window. The old Chinese man didn't turn his head, but he looked slyly at the boy out of the corner of his eye. Slowly he drew the pipe out of his mouth and blew a puff of smoke into the air.

Sai Fong

"Are you Mr. Fong?" asked Mario.

The man smoothly twisted his head, as if it were on a pivot, and looked at Mario. "I Sai Fong," he answered. His voice sounded strange, yet musical, like a plucked violin. Sai Fong had come from China many years ago, and he had a curious way of talking. But Mario liked it very much. He enjoyed the individual chirps of human beings almost as much as those of his cricket.

"I would like to buy a cricket cage, if you have any," said Mario.

Sai Fong put the pipe back in his mouth and took a few puffs. His eyes became even narrower than they had been before. "You got cricket?" he asked finally in a voice so soft that Mario could hardly hear it.

"Yes," said Mario. "Here he is." He opened the matchbox. Chester and Sai Fong looked at each other.

"Oh, very good!" said Sai Fong, and a remarkable change came over him. He suddenly became very lively, almost dancing a jig on the sidewalk. "You got cricket—very good!" He was laughing delightedly.

Mario was startled by Sai Fong's quick change. "I want to buy him a house," he said.

"Come in shop, please," said Sai Fong. He opened the door and they both went in.

Mario had never seen such a cluttered room. It was a jumble of Chinese odds and ends. Everything from silk robes to chopsticks to packages of hand laundry littered the shelves and chairs. And there was a faint, sweet smell of incense in the air. Sai Fong brushed a pile of Chinese newspapers to the floor. "You sit, please,"

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he said, motioning Mario to the chair he had cleared. "I back soon." And he disappeared through a door at the back of the shop.

Mario sat very quietly. He was afraid that if he moved, he would be buried under an avalanche of Chinese novelties. In a glass case right in front of him was a row of Chinese goddesses, carved in ivory. They all had the strangest smile on their lips—as if they knew something nobody else did. And they seemed to be staring straight at Mario. He tried to look at them, but he couldn't keep it up and had to look away.

In a few minutes Sai Fong came back into the room. He was carrying a cricket cage in the shape of a pagoda. There were seven tiers to it, each one a little smaller than the one below, and it ended in a slender spire. The lower parts of the cage were painted red and green, but the spire was golden. At one side was a gate with a tiny latch on it. Mario wanted to own the cage so much that he tingled all over. But it looked awfully expensive.

Sai Fong held up the first finger of his right hand and said solemnly, "This very ancient cricket cage. Once cricket who belonged to Emperor of all China lived in this cage. You know story of first cricket?"

"No, sir," said Mario.

"Very good," said Sai Fong. "I tell." He set the cage down and took the clay pipe out of his pocket. When it was lit and a thread of smoke was curling up from the bowl, he used the pipe to emphasize what he said, drawing little designs, like Chinese writing, in the air.

"Long ago, in beginning of time, were no crickets.



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But was very wise man, who knew all things. This man had name Hsi Shuai and spoke only truth. All secrets were open to him. He knew thoughts of animals and men, he knew desire of flower and tree, he knew destiny of sun and stars. Entire world was single page for him to read. And the high gods who lived in palace at summit of heaven loved Hsi Shuai because of truth he spoke.

"Now from many lands came men to hear their fate from Hsi Shuai. To one he say, 'You very good man. Live long as cedar tree on mountainside.' To other he say, 'You wicked man—die soon. Goodbye.' But to all men Hsi Shuai speak only truth. Of course wicked men most unhappy when hear what Hsi Shuai say. They think, 'I wicked man—now everyone know how wicked I am.' So all together wicked men decide to kill Hsi Shuai. Hsi Shuai know very well they want kill him—he know everything—but he not care. Within his heart, like smell of sweetness within lotus blossom, Hsi Shuai have peace. And so he wait.

"But high gods, who live in palace at summit of heaven, would not let Hsi Shuai be killed. More precious to them than kings was this one man who spoke only truth. So when wicked men raise swords above Hsi Shuai, high gods change him into cricket. And man who spoke only truth and knew all things now sings songs that no man understands and all men love. But high gods understand, and smile. For to them beautiful song of cricket is song of one who still speaks truth and knows all things."

Sai Fong

Sai Fong stopped speaking and smoked his pipe silently. Mario sat still too, looking at the cricket cage. He was thinking about the story and how much he wanted the cage. In his matchbox Chester Cricket had listened carefully. He was very touched by the tale of Hsi Shuai. Of course he couldn't tell if it was true, but he sort of believed it, because he personally had always thought that there was more to his song than just chirping. As usual when he didn't know what else to do, he rubbed one wing across the other. A single clear note sounded in the shop.

Sai Fong lifted his head. A smile curled up the ends of his ancient lips. "Ah so," he whispered. "Cricket has understood." He puffed a few more times.

Mario wanted to ask him how much the cage cost, but he was afraid to.

"Because this cricket so remarkable," said Sai Fong, "I sell cage for fifteen cents."

Mario sighed with relief. He could afford that. In his pocket he found a nickel and a dime, all that was left of his weekly allowance, which was a quarter. "I'll take it, Mr. Fong," he said and handed Sai Fong the money.

"I also make present free," said Sai Fong. He went behind the counter and took a little bell, no bigger than a honeybee, out of a drawer. With a piece of thread he hung it up inside the cage. Mario put Chester into the cage. The cricket jumped up and knocked against the bell. It tinkled faintly. "Sound like littlest bell in Silver Temple, far off up Yangtse River," said Sai Fong.

Mario thanked him for the bell and the story and

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everything. As he was about to leave the shop, Sai Fong said, "You want Chinese fortune cookie?"

"I guess so," said Mario. "I never had one."

Sai Fong took down a can from the shelf. It was full of fortune cookies—thin wafers that had been folded so there was an air space in each one. Mario bit into a cookie and found a piece of paper inside. He read what it said out loud: GOOD LUCK IS COMING YOUR WAY. BE READY.

"*Ha he!*" laughed Sai Fong—two high notes of joy. "Very good advice. You go now. Always be ready for happiness. Goodbye."

SEVEN

The Cricket Cage

That same night, after the Bellinis had gone home, Chester was telling Harry and Tucker about his trip to Chinatown. The cat and the mouse were sitting on the shelf outside, and Chester Cricket was crouched under the bell in the cage. Every minute or so, Tucker would get up and walk around to the other side of the pagoda. He was overcome with admiration for it.

"And Mr. Fong gave Mario a fortune cookie too," Chester was saying.

"I'm very fond of Chinese food myself," said Harry Cat. "I often browse through the garbage cans down in Chinatown."

Tucker Mouse stopped gaping at the cricket cage long enough to say, "Once I thought of living down there. But those Chinese make funny dishes. They make soup out of bird's nests and stew out of shark fins. They could make a soufflé out of a mouse. I decided to stay away."

A low rumble of a chuckle came from Harry Cat's throat. "Listen to the mouse," he said and gave Tucker a pat on the back that sent him rolling over and over.

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"Easy, Harry, easy," said Tucker, picking himself up. "You don't know your own strength." He stood up on his hind legs and looked in through the red-painted bars of the cage. "What a palace," he murmured. "Beautiful! You could feel like a king living in a place like this."

"Yes," said Chester, "but I'm not so keen on staying in a cage. I'm more used to tree stumps and holes in the ground. It makes me sort of nervous to be locked in here."

"Do you want to come out?" asked Harry. He sprung one of his nails out of the pad of his right forepaw and lifted the latch of the gate to the cage.

Chester pushed the gate and it swung open. He jumped out. "It's a relief to be free," he said, jumping around the shelf. "There's nothing like freedom."

"Say, Chester," said Tucker, "could I go in for a minute? I was never in a pagoda before."

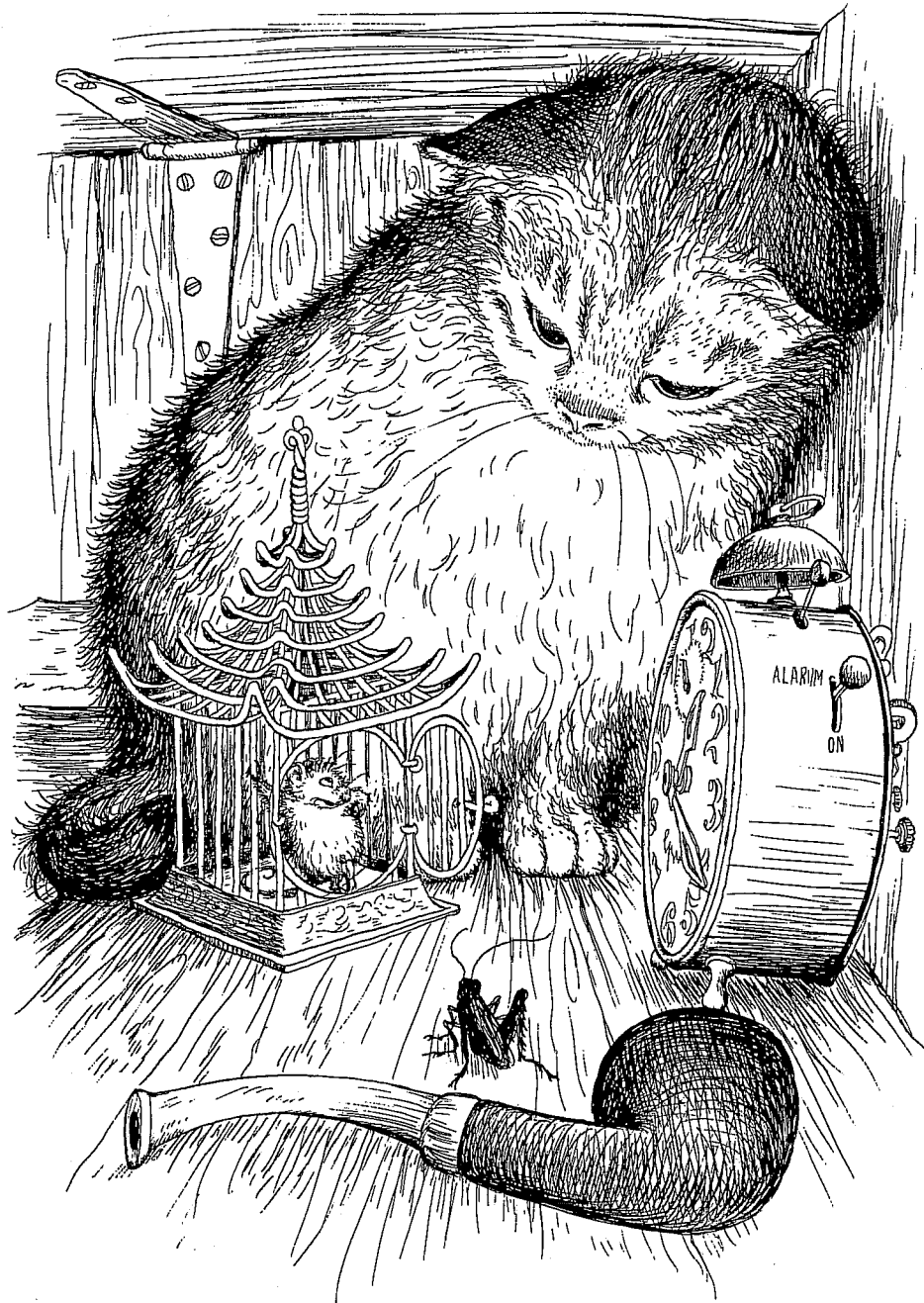
"Go right ahead," said Chester.

Tucker scrambled through the gate into the cage and pranced all around inside it. He lay down, first on one side, then on the other, and then on his back. "If only I had a silk robe now," he said, standing up on his hind legs again and resting one paw on a bar. "I feel like the Emperor of China. How do I look, Harry?"

"You look like a mouse in a trap," said Harry Cat.

"Every mouse should end up in a trap so nice," said Tucker.

"Do you want to sleep in the cage?" asked Chester.



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"Oh—could I!" exclaimed the mouse. His idea of luxury was to spend a night in such surroundings.

"Sure," said Chester. "I prefer the matchbox anyway."

"There's only one thing," said Tucker, stamping with his left hind leg. "This floor. It's a little hard to sleep on."

"I'll go over and get a bunch of paper from the drain pipe," volunteered Harry Cat.

"No, it'll make a mess," said Tucker. "We don't want to get Chester in trouble with the Bellinis." He hesitated.

"Um—maybe we could find something here."

"How about a piece of Kleenex," suggested Chester. "That's nice and soft."

"Kleenex would be good," said Tucker, "but I was wondering—" He paused again.

"Come on, Tucker," said Harry Cat. "You've got something on your mind. Let's have it."

"Well," Tucker began, "I sort of thought that if there were any dollar bills in the cash register—"

Harry burst out laughing. "You might know!" he said to Chester. "Who but this mouse would want to sleep on dollar bills?"

Chester jumped into the cash register drawer, which was open as usual. "There's a few dollars in here," he called up.

"Plenty to make a mattress," said Tucker Mouse. "Pass some in, please."

Chester passed the first dollar bill up to Harry Cat, who took it over to the cage and pushed it through the

The Cricket Cage

gate. Tucker took hold of one end of the bill and shook it out like a blanket. It was old and rumpled.

"Careful you don't rip it," said Harry.

"I wouldn't rip it," said Tucker. "This is one mouse who knows the value of a dollar."

Harry brought over the second dollar. It was newer and stiffer than the first. "Let me see," said Tucker. He lifted a corner of each bill, one in either paw. "This new one can go on the bottom—I like a crispy, clean sheet—and I'll pull the old one over for a cover. Now, a pillow is what I need. Please look in the cash register again."

Harry and Chester searched the compartments of the open drawer. There was a little loose change, but not much else.

"How about a fifty-cent piece?" said Harry.

"Too flat," answered Tucker Mouse.

The rear half of the drawer was still inside the cash register. Chester crawled back. It was dark and he couldn't see where he was going. He felt around until his head bumped against something. Whatever it was, it seemed to be big and round. Chester pushed and shoved and finally got it back out into the dim light of the newsstand. It was one of Mama Bellini's earrings, shaped like a sea shell, with sparkling little stones all over it.

"Would an earring do?" he shouted to Tucker.

"Well, I don't know," Tucker said.

"It looks as if it is covered with diamonds," said Harry Cat.

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"Perfect!" called Tucker. "Send it along."

Harry lifted the earring into the cage. Tucker examined it carefully, like a jeweler. "I think these are fake diamonds," he said at last.

"Yes, but it's still very pretty," said Chester, who had jumped up beside them.

"I guess it'll do," said Tucker. He lay down on his side on the new dollar bill, rested his head on the earring, and pulled the old dollar up over him. Chester and Harry heard him draw a deep breath of contentment. "I'm sleeping on money inside a palace," he said. "It's a dream come true."

Harry Cat purred his chuckle. "Good night, Chester," he said. "I'm going back to the drain pipe, where I can stretch out." He jumped to the floor.

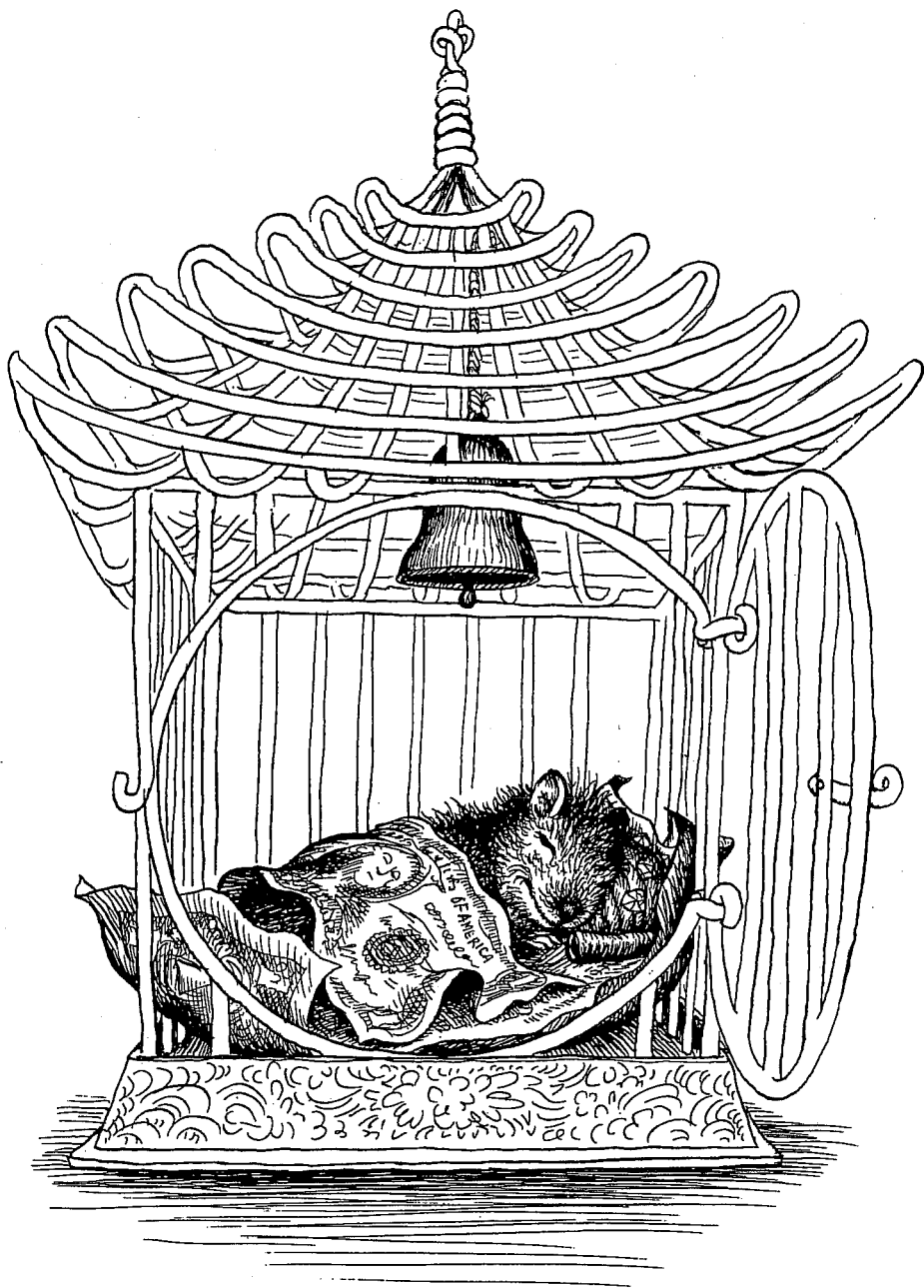
"Good night, Harry," Chester called.

Soft and silent as a shadow, Harry slipped out the opening in the side of the newsstand and glided over to the drain pipe. Chester hopped into his matchbox. He had gotten to like the feeling of the Kleenex. It was almost like the spongy wood of his old tree stump—and felt much more like home than the cricket cage. Now they each had their own place to sleep.

"Good night, Tucker," Chester said.

"'Night, Chester," Tucker answered.

Chester Cricket burrowed down deeper into the Kleenex. He was beginning to enjoy life in New York. Just before he fell asleep, he heard Tucker Mouse sighing happily in the cage.



EIGHT

Tucker's Life's Savings

Chester Cricket was having a dream. In his dream he was sitting on top of his stump back in Connecticut, eating a leaf from the willow tree. He would bite off a piece of leaf, chew it up, and swallow it, but for some reason it didn't taste as good as usual. There was something dry and papery about it, and it had a bitter flavor. Still, Chester kept eating, hoping that it would begin to taste better.

A storm came up in his dream. The wind blew clouds of dust across the meadow. They swirled around his stump, and Chester began to sneeze because the dust got in his nose. But he still held on to the leaf. And then he sneezed such a big sneeze that it woke him up.

Chester looked around him. He had been walking in his sleep and he was sitting on the edge of the cash register. The storm had been a gust of air that blew into the newsstand when the shuttle pulled up to the station. He was still choking from the dirt that flew around him. Chester looked down at his two front legs, half expecting to find the willow leaf. But it was no leaf

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he was holding. It was a two-dollar bill and he had already eaten half of it.

He dropped the bill and leaped over to the cricket cage, where Tucker Mouse was sleeping peacefully. Chester shook the silver bell furiously; it rang like a fire alarm. Tucker jumped out from under his blanket of dollar bills and ran around the cage shouting, "Help! Fire! Murder! Police!"

Then he realized where he was and sat down panting. "What is the matter with you, Chester?" he said. "I could have died from fright."

"I just ate half of a two-dollar bill," said Chester.

Tucker stared at him with disbelief. "You did *what*?" he asked.

"Yes," said Chester, "look." He fetched the ruined two-dollar bill from the cash register. "I dreamed it was a leaf and I ate it."

"Oh oh oh oh," moaned Tucker Mouse. "Not a one-dollar bill—not even a one-dollar bill and a fifty-cent piece—*two dollars* you had to eat! And from the Bellinis too—people who hardly make two dollars in two days."

"What am I going to do?" asked Chester.

"Pack your bags and go to California," said Tucker.

Chester shook his head. "I can't," he said. "They've been so good to me—I can't run away."

Tucker Mouse shrugged his shoulders. "Then stay and take the rap," he said. He crept out of the cage and examined the remains of the money. "There's still half of it left. Maybe we could put Scotch Tape along the edge and pass it off as a one-dollar bill."



Tucker's Life's Savings

"No one would believe it," said Chester. He sat down, still forlornly holding the bill. "Oh dear—and things were going along so nicely."

Tucker Mouse put his bedclothes back in the cash register drawer and came to sit beside Chester. "Buck up," he said. "We could still figure something out, maybe."

They both concentrated for a minute. Then Tucker clapped his paws and squeaked, "I got it! Eat the rest of it and they'll never know what happened."

"They'd accuse each other of losing it," said Chester. "I don't want to make any bad feeling between them."

"Oh, you're so honorable!" said Tucker. "It's disgusting."

"Besides, it tastes bad," added Chester.

"Then how about this." Tucker had a new idea. "We frame the janitor who cleans the station. I'll take the evidence over and plant it in his water closet. He whopped me with a mop last week. I would be glad to see him go to jail for a few days."

"No, no," said Chester. "We can't get somebody else in trouble."

"Then a stranger," said Tucker. "We tip over the Kleenex, break the glass in the alarm clock, and throw all the small change on the floor. They'll think a thief came in the night. You could even put a bandage on and make out like a hero. I could see it all—"

"No!" Chester interrupted him. "The damage we'd do would cost even more than the two dollars."

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Tucker had one more idea: he was going to volunteer to go over and swipe two dollars from the lunch counter. But before he could suggest that, the top of the stand was suddenly lifted off. They had forgotten what time it was. Mama Bellini, who was on duty in the morning, stood towering, frowning down on them. Tucker let out a squeak of fear and jumped to the floor.

"Catch the mouse!" shouted Mama. She picked up a *Fortune* magazine—very big and heavy—and heaved it after Tucker. It hit him on the left hind leg just as he vanished into the drain pipe.

Chester Cricket sat frozen to the spot. He was caught red-handed, holding the chewed-up two dollars in his front legs. Muttering with rage, Mama Bellini picked him up by his antennae, tossed him into the cricket cage, and locked the gate behind him. When she had put the newsstand in order, she pulled out her knitting and began to work furiously. But she was so angry she kept dropping stitches, and that made her angrier still.

Chester crouched in a far corner of the cage. Things had been going so well between Mama and him—but that was all ruined now. He half expected that she would pick him up, cage and all, and throw him onto the shuttle tracks.

At eight-thirty Mario and Papa arrived. Mario wanted to go to Coney Island for a swim today, but before he could even say "Good morning," Mama Bellini stretched out her hand and pointed sternly at Chester. There he was, with the evidence beside him.

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A three-cornered conversation began. Mama denounced Chester as a money eater and said further that she suspected him of inviting mice and other unsavory characters into the newsstand at night. Papa said he didn't think Chester had eaten the two dollars on purpose, and what difference did it make if a mouse or two came in? Mama said he had to go. Papa said he could stay, but he'd have to be kept in the cage. And Mario knew that Chester, like all people who are used to freedom, would rather die than live his life behind bars.

Finally it was decided that since the cricket was Mario's pet, the boy would have to replace the money. And when he had, Chester could come out again. Until then—the cage.

By working part-time delivering groceries, when he wasn't taking care of the newsstand, Mario thought he could earn enough in a couple of weeks to get Chester out of jail. Of course that would mean no swimming at Coney Island, and no movies, and no nothing, but it was worth it. He fed the cricket his breakfast—leftover asparagus tips and a piece of cabbage leaf. Chester had practically no appetite after what had happened. Then, when the cricket was finished, Mario said, "Goodbye," and told him not to worry, and went off to the grocery store to see about his job.

That night, after Papa had shut up the newsstand, Chester was hanging through the gilded bars of his

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cage. Earlier in the evening Mario had come back to feed him his supper, but then he had to leave right away to get in a few more hours of work. Most of the day Chester had spent inventing hopping games to try to keep himself entertained, but they didn't work, really. He was bored and lonely. The funny thing was that although he had been sleepy and kept wishing it were night, now that it was, he couldn't fall asleep.

Chester heard the soft padding of feet beneath him. Harry Cat sprang up and landed on the shelf. In a moment Tucker Mouse followed him from the stool, groaning with pain. He was still limping in his left hind leg where the *Fortune* magazine had hit him.

"How long is the sentence?" asked Harry.

"Until Mario can pay back the money," sighed Chester.

"Couldn't you get out on bail for the time being?" asked Tucker.

"No," said Chester. "And anyway, nobody has any bail. I'm surprised they let me off that easily."

Harry Cat folded his front paws over each other and rested his head on them. "Let me get this straight," he said. "Does Mario have to work for the money as punishment—or does he just have to get it somewhere?"

"He just has to get it," said Chester. "Why should he be punished? I'm the one who ate the money."

Harry looked at Tucker—a long look, as if he expected the mouse to say something. Tucker began to fidget. "Say, Chester, you want to escape?" he asked.

Tucker's Life's Savings

"We can open the cage. You could come and live in the drain pipe."

"No." Chester shook his head. "It wouldn't be fair to Mario. I'll just have to serve out the time."

Harry looked at Tucker again and began tapping one of his paws. "Well?" he said finally.

Tucker moaned and massaged his sore spot. "Oh, my poor leg! That Mama Bellini can sure heave a magazine. Feel the bump, Harry," he offered.

"I felt it already," said Harry. "Now enough of the stalling. You have money."

"Tucker has money?" said Chester Cricket.

Tucker looked nervously from one to the other. "I have my life's savings," he said in a pathetic voice.

"He's the richest mouse in New York," said Harry. "Old Money Bags Mouse, he's known as."

"Now wait a minute, Harry," said Tucker. "Let's not make too much from a few nickels and dimes."

"How did you get money?" asked Chester.

Tucker Mouse cleared his throat and began wringing his two front feet. When he spoke, his voice was all choked up with emotion. "Years ago," he said, "when yet a little mouse I was, tender in age and lacking in experience, I moved from the sweet scenes of my childhood—Tenth Avenue, that is—into the Times Square subway station. And it was here that I learned the value of economicness—which means saving. Many and many an old mouse did I see, crawling away unwanted to a poor mouse's grave, because he had not

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saved. And I resolved that such a fate would never come to me."

"All of which means that you've got a pile of loot back there in the drain pipe," said Harry Cat.

"Just a minute, please, if you wouldn't mind," said Tucker. "I'll tell it in my own way." His voice became high and pitiful again. "So for all the long years of my youth, when I could have been gamboling—which means playing—with the other mousies, I saved. I saved paper, I saved food, I saved clothing—"

"Save time and get to the point," said Harry.

Tucker gave Harry a sour smile. "And I also saved money," he went on. "In the course of many years of scrounging, it was only natural I should find a certain amount of loose change. Often—oh, often, my friends," Tucker put his hand over his heart, "would I sit in the opening of my drain pipe, watching the human beings and waiting. And whenever one of them dropped a coin—*however small!*—pennies I love—I would dash out, at great peril to life and limb, and bring it back to my house. Ah, when I think of the tramping shoes and the dangerous galoshes—! Many times have I had my toes stepped on and my whiskers torn off because of these labors. But it was worth it! Oh, it was worth it, my friends, on account of now I have two half dollars, five quarters, two dimes, six nickels, and eighteen pennies tucked away in the drain pipe!"

"Which makes two dollars and ninety-three cents," said Harry Cat, after doing some quick addition.

Tucker's Life's Savings

"And proud I am of it!" said Tucker Mouse.

"If you've got all that, why did you want to sleep on the two dollar bills in the cricket cage?" asked Chester.

"No folding money yet," said Tucker. "It was a new sensation."

"You can get Chester out and still have ninety-three cents left," said Harry Cat.

"But I'll be ruined," whimpered Tucker. "I'll be wiped out. Who will take care of me in my old age?"

"I will!" said Harry. "Now stop acting like a skinflint and let's get the money."

Chester rang the silver bell to get their attention. "I don't think Tucker should have to give up his life's savings," he said. "It's his money and he can do what he wants with it."

Tucker Mouse poked Harry in the ribs. "Listen to the cricket," he said. "Acting noble and making me look like a bum. Of course I'll give the money! Wherever mice are spoken of, never let it be said that Tucker Mouse was stingy with his worldly goods. Besides, I could think of it as rent I pay for sleeping in the cage."

In order that Tucker could keep at least one of each kind of coin, Harry Cat figured out that they should bring over one half dollar, four quarters, one dime, five nickels, and fifteen cents. That would leave the mouse with a half dollar, a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and three cents.

"It's not a bad beginning," said Tucker. "I could make up the losses in a year, maybe."



Tucker's Life's Savings

The cat and the mouse had to make several trips back and forth between the drain pipe and the newsstand, carrying the money in their mouths. They passed the coins into the cage one by one, and Chester built them up into a column, starting with the half dollar on the bottom and ending with the dime, which was smallest, on top. It was morning by the time they were finished. They had just time enough to share half a hot dog before Mama Bellini was due to open the stand.

Mario came with her. He wanted to feed Chester early and then work all morning until he took over the newsstand at noon. When they lifted off the cover, Mama almost dropped her end. There was Chester, sitting on top of the column of change, chirping merrily.

Mama's first suspicion was that the cricket had sneaked out and smuggled all the money from the cash register into the cage. But when she looked in the drawer, the money from the night before was still there.

Mario had the idea that Papa might have left it as a surprise. Mama shook her head. She would certainly have known if he had two dollars to leave anybody.

They asked Paul, the conductor, if he'd seen anyone around the newsstand. He said no. The only thing he'd noticed was that that big cat who sometimes prowled through the station had seemed to be busier than usual last night. And of course they knew that he couldn't have had anything to do with replacing the money.

But whoever left it, Mama Bellini was true to her word. Chester was allowed out of the cage, and no

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further questions were asked. Although she wouldn't have admitted it for the world, Mama felt the same way about money that Tucker Mouse did. When you had it, you had it—and you didn't bother too much about where it came from.